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Realism and Artifice: Innovation, Wagner's *Ring*, and Theatre Practice in the German Democratic Republic

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Opera scholars have tended to identify Patrice Chéreau's and Pierre Boulez's 1976 *Der Ring des Nibelungen* production as the primary instigator of what David Levin calls the 'the project of reimagining opera'.[1] Chéreau's Shavian staging of the *Ring* as a critique of industrial capitalism profoundly unsettled the status quo in Bayreuth. Yet the iconic status to which the production has since been elevated undoubtedly owes something to the fact that Chéreau had the temerity to undermine accepted performing traditions at the shrine of the master himself. Arguably more influential was the sustained and penetrating drive to rethink opera performance in the German Democratic Republic during the second half of the twentieth century.[2] This is particularly the case where Wagner is concerned. The theatrical innovations of Walter Felsenstein and Bertolt Brecht in East Berlin in the 1950s inspired a generation of opera directors whose unconventional approaches had implications far beyond the narrow confines of the GDR's borders. Both Joachim Herz and Götz Friedrich had pre-empted Chéreau with realistic stagings of the *Ring* in Leipzig (1973-76) and Covent Garden (1974-76)

[1] David J. Levin, *Unsettling Opera: Staging Mozart, Verdi, Wagner, and Zemlinsky* (Chicago and London, 2007), p. 5. In this context he calls the Chéreau–Boulez production 'a neutron bomb of opera production'. Ibid., p. 18.

[2] The impact of East Germany on contemporary opera has been illuminated in a number of recent studies. See Joy H. Calico, 'The Legacy of GDR Directors on the Post–*Wende* Opera Stage', in Elaine Kelly and Amy Wlodarski (eds), *Art Outside the Lines: New Perspectives on GDR Art Culture* (forthcoming); Patrick Carnegy, *Wagner and the Art of the Theatre* (New Haven and London, 2006); and Werner Hintze, Clemens Risi and Robert Sollich, *Realistische Musiktheater: Geschichte, Erben, Gegenpositionen* (Berlin, 2009).

respectively; an East German presence in Bayreuth was manifest through productions by Friedrich (*Tannhäuser*, 1972) and Harry Kupfer (*Der fliegende Holländer*, 1978, and *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, 1988), while Ruth Berghaus challenged Frankfurt audiences with her absurdist leftist productions of *Parsifal* (1982) and the *Ring* (1985-87).

At the crux of Levin's project of reimagining opera is the renegotiation of the hierarchical relationships between the composer, director and audience, and the undermining of opera as a timeless, almost ritualistic event. In essence, it involves a confrontation of the illusion of distance that Adorno pinpointed as central to the bourgeois opera experience,[3] an experience that calls for the opera house to function as a musical museum. Heather McDonald, for example, a vociferous critic of directors' opera, argues that: 'What *is* actually "fresh" about a Mozart opera, besides its terrible beauty, is that it comes from a world that no longer exists.'[4] The preservation of this world depends on illusionistic stagings that avoid attempts to ground opera in terms of its contemporary significance.[5]

Compositional authority is frequently invoked in support of this traditional stance, particularly in the case of Wagner. For conservative Wagnerians the role of the director is essentially a curatorial one; his or her function is to maintain the composer's emphasis on the timeless, mythical qualities of his operas, qualities that were enshrined by Cosima Wagner in her devotion to Wagner's dictates of naturalism. Yet as James Treadwell observes, the timelessness of this naturalism is in itself an illusion; it involves

[3] Theodor W. Adorno, trans. E.B. Ashton, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music* (London, 1988), p. 81.

[4] Heather McDonald, 'The Abduction of Opera,' *City Journal*, (Summer 2007), at: http://www.city–journal.org/html/17_3_urbanities–regietheater.html (accessed 31 May 2010).

[5] Tellingly, in the same article, McDonald demands that Peter Gelb, who took over as general manager of New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2006, make clear to prospective directors 'that he is not interested in their opinions on contemporary class or sexual relations.'

a transformation 'into the world of nineteenth-century German representations of a romanticised and patriotic nature, with all the attendant historical and ideological baggage.'[6] Moreover, its authenticity is subject to question. Indeed the adherence in Bayreuth to illusionistic stage designs can be conceived of as a political act; the emphasis placed on naturalism allowed Wagner's right-wing advocates to downplay both his youthful revolutionary tendencies and the socio-political content of his operas by precluding interpretations that contextualised them beyond a mythical realm.[7]

The significance of the GDR in the development of contemporary opera performance negates the well-worn image of the state as culturally isolated and reactionary. On a closer look, however, its influence is perhaps not surprising. The tensions involved in accommodating the Germanic musical heritage into frameworks of Marxist historiography necessitated a reconsideration not only of the socio-political relevance of opera but also of the function of the authorial voice on stage. The demand for socio-political interpretations in the early years of the state displaced the notion of compositional autonomy in favour of productions that explored the wider context of the composer's *Weltbild* or world view. In later years, as artists began to question the teleological narratives of history that had dominated in the foundation years of the GDR, there was a drive to dispense with interpretation altogether and to divorce the composer from the art work. Perhaps the most significant impetus for innovation by East German directors arose from the complexities of reconciling the fundamentally unrealistic art that is opera with the tenets of socialist realism. Questions surrounding the role that realism should play in opera and how it should be manifest in the artificial

[6] James Treadwell, 'Reading and staging again', *Cambridge Opera Journal*, 10/2 (1998): 205–20; here 217.

[7] See in particular Mark Berry, 'Richard Wagner and the Politics of Music Drama', *The Historical Journal,* 47/3 (2004): 663–83.

environment of the theatre prompted a large-scale re-evaluation of traditional production practices.

The scope and diversity of the approaches inspired by this process of re-evaluation emerges particularly clear in two productions: Joachim Herz's Leipzig staging of the *Ring* and Ruth Berghaus's Frankfurt *Ring*.[8] Close contemporaries – both were born in Dresden, Herz in 1924 and Berghaus in 1927 – these directors embodied distinct spheres of East German theatre. While Herz served his apprenticeship under Walter Felsenstein at the Komische Oper, Berghaus's formative training was in dance and spoken theatre: she studied choreography with Gret Palucca in Dresden and theatre at both the Deutsches Theater and Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, which she later directed. These disparate routes of learning resulted in very different production aesthetics and two quite contrasting approaches to realism on stage. Herz's work was clearly imbued with the spirit of Felsenstein; he coupled the latter's preoccupation with historical realism with a Brechtian abhorrence of illusion, and his paramount concern was to render opera accessible. Berghaus's style, in contrast, like that of her friend and sometimes collaborator Heiner Müller, could be described as post-Brechtian. Shunning

[8] Official recordings were unfortunately made of neither staging, although an unofficial video of the production process of Berghaus's *Ring* is held in the archives of the Städtische Bühnen Frankfurt. The Leipzig *Ring* was documented in detail in two Arbeitshefte by the Akademie der Künste in East Berlin: 'Joachim Herz inszeniert Richard Wagners *Ring des Nibelungen* am Opernhaus Leipzig,' 21 (ed. Marion Reinisch, 1975) and 29 (ed. Eginhard Röhlig, 1980). A valuable account is also provided in Marion Benz, 'Die Wagner–Inszenierungen von Joachim Herz: Studie zur theatralen Wagner–Rezeption in der DDR', (Ph.D. diss., Friedrich–Alexander–Universität Erlangen–Nürnberg, 1998), pp. 230–86. For a detailed discussion in English see Carnegy, pp. 331–43. Berghaus's Frankfurt *Ring* is discussed in detail in Sigrid Neef, *Das Theater der Ruth Berghaus* (Berlin [East], 1989); 154–65; Tom Sutcliffe, *Believing in Opera* (Princeton, 1996), pp. 146–58; Corinne Holtz, *Ruth Berghaus. Ein Porträt* (Hamburg, 2005), pp. 224–60; and Carnegy, 369–76.

a didactic approach, she asked more of her audiences, presenting them with '"open" dramatic forms' containing multiple possible interpretations.[9]

Placing the *Ring* in its Socio-Political Context: Joachim Herz in Leipzig

That Wagner emerged as a focal point for operatic innovation reflects his difficult position in the GDR. In the 1950s, in particular, he represented an ambiguous figure and his reception embodied the tensions associated with the drive to appropriate the bourgeois Germanic musical canon for the socialist state.[10] Artists such as Brecht and Paul Dessau, who had spent the war in exile in the West, were sceptical of the role that this heritage had to play in a socialist society. During the heated debates about Wagner's position in the socialist canon that erupted in the late 1950s, Dessau notably declared that the issue at stake was not Wagner's genius itself but whether his genius had relevance in the political context of the GDR.[11] Those of a Lukáscian bent, in contrast, stressed the importance of the bourgeois canon, and, drawing on Marx's concept of history as an agent of change, argued that an awareness of history was essential to effect a trajectory to a socialist utopia. The problem, from this perspective, lay not in the musical canon itself but in the bourgeois tendency to divorce the canon from its socio-political origins. If contextualized in terms of these origins, the musicologist Georg Knepler argued, the canon had the potential to illuminate the historical precedents to the problems afflicting post-war German society. In the case of

[9] Jonathan Kalb, *The Theatre of Heiner Müller* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 19.

[10] For discussion of the debates surrounding Wagner reception in the early years of the GDR see Werner P. Seiferth, 'Wagner–Pflege in der DDR', *Richard–Wagner–Blätter: Zeitschrift des Aktionskreises für das Werk Richard Wagners*, 13/3–4 (1989): 89–113; and Elaine Kelly, 'Imagining Richard Wagner: The Janus Head of a Divided Nation', *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History*, 9/4 (2008): 799–829.

[11] Paul Dessau, 'Musik der Gründerjahre: Ein Interview', *Theater der Zeit*, 13/12 (1958): 19–20.

Wagner, Knepler explained: 'Wagner's work is first of all a mirror of the German intelligentsia of the previous century with their ambitious ideals and hopes, yet also with their deep-seated pessimism and their incapacity to grasp the developmental trends of the time.'[12]

Knepler's observations found a practical expression in the work of Joachim Herz, whose Leipzig *Ring* represented the culmination of a prolonged engagement with Wagner that included a watershed staging of *Die Meistersinger* in Leipzig in 1960 and a full-length film of *Der fliegende Höllander*, produced by the East German film studio DEFA in 1964.[13] Herz's productions were concerned specifically with uncovering the historical contexts of Wagner's operas. While his *Meistersinger* was grounded firmly in sixteenth-century Nuremburg, his versions of *Der fliegende Holländer* and the *Ring* focused directly on the paradoxes and constraints of Wagner's nineteenth-century milieu. Like Chéreau, Herz understood the *Ring* cycle not as a system of timeless symbols but as a network of nineteenth-century signs. However, while Chéreau interpreted these signs through a variety of lenses, juxtaposing historical and contemporary realism with the fairytale elements of Wagner's original,[14] Herz's *mise-*

[12] Knepler, 'Zur Wagner–Ehrung 1963', *Richard Wagner 1813–1883* (Berlin [East]: Deutscher Kulturbund, 1963): 5–9; here, p. 6. Although published anonymously, earlier drafts of the text in the archive of the Akademie der Künste and the Bundesarchiv confirm Knepler as the author. See Archiv der Akademie der Künste: VDK 589 and Bundesarchiv-SAPMO: DY 30/IV 2/9.06/295.

[13] Other Wagner performances included productions of *Lohengrin* (Leipzig, 1965) and *Tannhäuser* (Frankfurt am Main, 1965). For discussion of the film version of *Der fliegende Höllander* see Joy H. Calico, 'Wagner in East Germany: Joachim Herz's *Der fliegende Höllander* (1964)', in Jeongwon Joe and Sander L. Gilman (eds), *Wagner and Cinema* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2010), pp. 294–311.

[14] Jean-Jacques Nattiez describes Chéreau's dragon as 'a dragon on wheels which, manipulated by Kabuki-like figures in black, springs straight out of the forest of Macbeth or the fairy tales of our childhood.' Nattiez, trans. Thomas Repensek, 'Chéreau's Treachery', *October*, 14 (1980): 71–100; here 84–85.

en-scène translated Wagner's mythological constructs onto the single chronological plane of nineteenth-century Prussia. He explained: 'We wanted to show for once that this is no Germanic mythological fairytale, but a critical engagement of the composer with his era.'[15]

At the crux of Herz's performing aesthetic was the emphasis he placed on rendering realistic the content of opera; his work was characterized both by the historical veracity of his dramaturgy and his determination to present Wagner's characters as plausible human beings rather than mythical figures. His *Ring* production, in a reading that recalled Hans Rosenberg's analyses of the decline of the German *Sonderweg*, presented Wagner's cycle as a commentary on the power struggles of the *Gründerjahre*.[16] His conception traced the tense relationship between the old order of Prussian elites and new industrial capitalists of the late nineteenth century, charting the trajectory from their early power struggles (Wotan and Alberich), to their later symbiotic relationship (Gunter and Hagen) and ultimate downfall. The central theme of the production was the inability of industrial capitalism to offer any genuine social reform; despite the failure of the aristocracy, reflected in the decline of the gods, industrial capitalism represented no real break from Prussian feudalism; Prussian values continued to shape the industrial world,[17] and as Herz made clear in his depiction of the

[15] Herz, 'Wagner und kein Ende,' *Theater der Zeit*, 38/6 (1983): 31–34; here 32.

[16] William W. Hagen, 'Descent of the *Sonderweg*: Hans Rosenberg's History of Old-Regime Prussia', *Central European History*, 24/1 (1991): 24–50.

[17] Christoph Hamm, who worked with Herz on the conception of the *Ring*, notably observed 'Alberich signifies new methods (capitalism) in the old basic system (exploitation system).' Letter exchange between Hamm and Herz in Arbeitsheft, 21, p. 22.

relationship between Gunter and Hagen in *Götterdämmerung*, capitalists were dependent on the aristocracy for their power and survival.[18]

Herz's attention to historic detail was reflected in the set design and costumes of Rudolf Heinrich, who had also trained at the Komische Oper. Nibelheim and Walhalla were clear representations of the two poles of nineteenth-century power. While Nibelheim was depicted as a foundry, Walhalla, as Carnegy describes, was a 'stately pile modelled on elements from the Palais de Justice in Brussels, the Emperor's Staircase of the Burgtheater in Vienna, the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, and the Germania Niederwalddenkmal on the Rhine'.[19] The imperial robes of the gods clearly marked their privileged but increasingly anachronistic status; cement gray in colour, dusty and tattered, theirs was a fading grandeur.[20] Alberich was dressed in oil-stained overalls,[21] and Heinrich modelled the costumes of the giants on images of manual labourers and photographs of dockworkers from the 1850s.[22] This sense of historical place was maintained throughout the four operas. Hunding's house bore the dark fittings of a reactionary bourgeois lodging, and the Giebichung Hall embraced a more streamlined Jugendstil design, reflecting the chronological progression of the cycle. Steam was replaced by electricity, wood by steel, and the costumes of its inhabitants were both shinier and more sophisticated than those of their predecessors.[23]

A commitment to realism also underpinned Herz's portrayal of the cycle's characters. Indeed, his emphasis on character motivation in the drama was perhaps the

[18] He notably compared their relationship to that of Krupp and the Kaiser. See Herz in Arbeitsheft, 21, p. 31.

[19] Carnegy, 336.

[20] Benz, 261

[21] Ibid., 262.

[22] Arbeitsheft, 21, p. 43.

[23] See Benz, pp. 265-66.

clearest manifestation of his studies with Felsenstein. The latter demanded that every action be implicitly determined by the content of the opera to the extent that a character should convince the audience that he is singing the text not because it is a requirement of the dramatic action but because 'no other mode of expression but song is available to him'.[24] In preparation for their production, Herz and Heinrich adopted a similar approach, examining not only the broader narratives of the *Ring* but also teasing out the intricacies of the cycle's content in minute detail. The individual actions of each character were studied in impressive depth. Herz, for example, pondered Brünnhilde's refusal to part with the ring in *Götterdämmerung*, asking from whose perception this was a folly: from the official standpoint of Walhalla or her own? [25] Ultimately, the Leipzig team aimed to portray characters and scenarios that were primarily logical and credible. Heinrich, in this context, was particularly preoccupied with the case of the giants. How had two giants constructed Walhalla by themselves and why was Wotan afraid of them given their lower status in the pecking order? He concluded that they represented the increasing power of the masses in the newly industrialised world of the nineteenth century,[26] and depicted this power by presenting Fasolt and Fafner as the leaders of two sizeable teams of masons.[27]

Crucially, Herz's emphasis on rendering the content of the *Ring* realistic did not extend to an illusionistic staging. It is interesting in this context to consider his take on Wagner's own production of the cycle. Herz argues that Wagner's use of mythology

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[24] Walter Felsenstein, ed. Stephan Stompor, *Schriften zum Musiktheater* (Berlin [East], 1976), p. 70.

[25] See letter exchange between Herz and Heinrich in Joachim Herz, ed. Ilse Kobán, *Theater - Kunst des erfüllten Augenblicks: Briefe, Vorträge, Notate, Gespräche, Essays* (Berlin [East], 1989), p. 160.

[26] Arbeitsheft, 21, p. 43.

[27] There were forty–five giants in all. See Carnegy, 334.

effectively functioned as a *Verfremdungseffekt*, forcing his nineteenth-century audiences to engage with the contradictions in their society to which they had become inured.[28] In his view, the impact of this effect diminished over time, and by the twentieth century the mythological framework had become an impenetrable cloak which prevented viewers from engaging with the deeper issues in the cycle.[29] Thus, by avoiding an illusionistic setting in his own production, Herz aimed to revitalise what he saw as the underlying impetus of the cycle. He offered his audience a series of visual cues to the nineteenth century, but made no attempt to stage a seamless recreation of the period. His props were not naturalistic but simply signs or references to the nineteenth century and the artifice of the theatre played a significant role in his conception. Stage lights were visible and the stage surround was often bare; both the dragon and the fire surrounding Brünnhilde's rock were depicted by the dancers of the Leipzig ballet; and frequent use was made of photomontages.[30] The disjunctions created by the juxtaposition of artifice and realism were central to Herz's fundamental ethos of opera production. As he explained in an essay of 1965: 'One should prevent the public from dreaming and provoke them into thinking.'[31]

A Post-Brechtian *Ring*: Ruth Berghaus in Frankfurt

While Herz endeavoured to decode Wagner's nineteenth-century signs for a contemporary audience, Berghaus was less concerned with interpreting Wagner's

[28] Herz, 'Die realistisch-komödiantische Wagner-Interpretation 1960–1976,' in Kobán, p. 195.

[29] Arbeitsheft, 21, p. 76.

[30] See Benz, 267–69 for an extended discussion of the emphasis placed by Herz on the artifice of the theatre in his *Ring* production.

[31] Herz, 'Richard Wagner und das Erbe – Möglichkeiten des Musiktheaters an einer Repertoirebühne', in Kobán, p. 129.

authorial intent, conscious or otherwise. She viewed artworks as living entities and was sceptical of the value of grounding Wagner's operas in terms of his own experiences and writings. As she observed to Heiner Müller:

> I always come back to the example: 'The Rhine flows from right to left.' From here I know where and when the work was composed, that Wagner viewed Germany from France, and that means: he had distance. As a consequence, I can't blindly trust Wagner's pronouncements on political and cultural questions. Or: when I direct a work of yours, I can't read everything that you have said about cultural politics in newspapers etc., I have to read the work.[32]

This disassociation of the author from the work and the privileging of the text in the Barthesian sense can be viewed as a manifestation of the historical consciousness that characterised artistic thought in the final decades of the GDR. As the promised socialist utopia failed to materialise and the revolutionary spirit of the post-war years ground to a halt, the uncomplicated narratives of history that had dominated cultural thought in the early years of the state began to falter. In the 1970s and 1980s, artists deconstructed the iconic status to which historical figures such as Goethe and Beethoven had been elevated, and challenged the unified teleological trajectories of Marxist historiography that shaped interpretations of past.[33] In the case of canonical art works, this involved not only viewing them independently of the supposed socio-political perspectives of their authors but also confronting the notion that a work could be reduced to single coherent interpretation. This shift in thought had significant implications for theatre practice;

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[32] 'Ruth Berghaus und Heiner Müller in Gespräch,' Zeuthen, 4.10.1987, in Neef, p. 187.

[33] For a general overview of this rise of historical consciousness see David Bathrick, *'The Powers of Speech': The Politics of Culture in the GDR* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1995), p. 41. For a music-specific discussion see Elaine Kelly, 'Composing the Canon: The Individual and The Romantic Aesthetic in the GDR', in: Matthew Philpotts and Sabine Rolle (eds), *Edinburgh German Yearbook 3*: *Contested Legacies – Constructions of Cultural Heritage in the GDR* (Rochester, New York, 2009), pp. 198-217.

directors such as Berghaus and Heiner Müller shunned didactic interpretations in favour of productions that exposed the multiplicity of a text, transferring the onus of interpretation from the director to individual audience members.

In terms of the Frankfurt *Ring* production, Berghaus explained: 'we tell in the tetralogy a tale of gods, a family tale, social and historical events. … But I would consider it vandalism of Wagner, if one was to settle for only one of these named processes.'[34] Her staging consciously avoided a coherent narrative; instead of translating Wagner's semiology for her audience, she and the set designer, Alex Manthey, added their own layers of playful signs. Spherical shapes, for example, featured prominently,[35] while masks played a central role: the gods held up placards depicting unhappy faces when Freia was taken hostage by the giants; the Nibelungen were represented by 'cluster-groups of quasi-African white masks',[36] and the dragon by an 'ominous red-smeared mouth-and-nose-deathmask'.[37] Berghaus's emphasis was always on the signifier rather than the signified. 'The theatre', she remarked, 'subsists on signs. The very stage is a sign.'[38] This philosophy extended to the characters on stage; she made no attempt to humanise the figures of the *Ring*, but presented them instead as absurdist puppet-like ciphers.[39]

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[34] Berghaus, 'Gespräch zur *Ring*–Konzeption an der Johannes–Gutenberg–Universität Mainz am 26. Juni 1987', in Neef, p. 158.

[35] Carnegy, p. 370.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Sutcliffe, p. 154.

[38] Berghaus, 'Gespräch zur *Ring*–Konzeption an der Johannes–Gutenberg–Universität Mainz', p. 162.

[39] Many of the female characters were doll-like in their portrayal. The Rhinemaidens were affixed to plinths which glowed red in response to danger, while the female vassals in *Götterdämmerung*, as Sutcliffe describes, were akin to 'mannequins or Stepford wives, lips and eyes wide in brainless surprise'. Sutcliffe, p. 156.

The apparent impenetrability of Berghaus's *Ring* has led some commentators to question whether her work can be situated in the context of Marxist theatre traditions. Carnegy, for example, asks: 'Was Berghaus really, in heart and soul, the Marxist people's artist that her affiliation with Brecht and Dessau would suggest? … No aspect of her productions could conceivably be described as socially realist, socially aware or reaching out to a broad audience.[40] Yet, this perspective, which assumes that accessibility and realism go hand in hand, betrays a narrow interpretation of Marxist art, and overlooks the experiments of directors active in the GDR such as Benno Besson, Müller and Berghaus herself to combine artistic realism with more formalistic or abstract stagings. These experiments drew attention to the micro- rather than macro-structures of works, and explored how realism in art could be effected not through narrative but through processes of *aktualisace* ("foregrounding"), Brechtian alienation, and a renewed emphasis on the sensory experience of theatre. There was a consistency, for example, in Berghaus's use of signs in the *Ring* – Holtz aptly likens the array of hand gestures employed throughout to a Passacaglia[41] – that foregrounded underlying themes of suppression, property ownership, and the uneasy relationship between power and love.

A crucial difference between Berghaus's approach and Herz's theatrical realism was her emphasis on questions of *how* rather than *why*, an emphasis that recalled Brecht's early *Lehrstücke* and effectively preferenced style over content. Her focus was invariably directed at the process of interpretation; reflecting her choreographical background, she was interested more in the gestures and movements that define an action than in the meaning of the action itself. In a discussion of how to stage a scene in

[40] Carnegy, p. 374.

[41] Holtz, p. 250.

Müller's *Der Lohndrücker* that involved beer drinking, for example, she explained that she would start by considering what defines the act of drinking beer, and explore with the actors how this act differs from drinking wine.[42] A similar approach is evident in her study of power in the *Ring*; instead of elucidating the narratives of power in the drama, she played with the dichotomous elements of power itself. Her gods tottered on high platform shoes that reflected not only their lofty status, but also the constraints that this status implied. Sutcliffe aptly describes the shoes as an 'uncomfortable privilege'.[43] This privilege was one that weighed increasingly heavily on Wotan as the cycle progressed. In *Die Walküre*, his desire to escape the constraints of the kingdom he had created was reflected in his change of footwear: he entered wearing a raincoat and plain black shoes. He was reminded of his duties, however, by Fricka, who 'hung his boots of office with their built-up box bases round his neck.'[44] Finally, following the riddle scene in *Siegfried*, Wotan left his godly shoes in Mime's cave, a gesture that marked his ultimate abdication from power.

Other leitmotifs highlighted the restrictions facing female characters. Of particular significance was the guilded kitchen chair carried by Fricka in *Die Walküre*, a sign that embodied not only her own desire that Wotan provide her with domestic bliss, but also the wider power and powerlessness of women.[45] This theme resurfaced at the end of the opera, marking the constraints of domesticity implied by Brünnhilde's transformation from Valkyrie to mere mortal. When surrounded by flames, Brünnhilde

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[42] 'Ruth Berghaus und Heiner Müller in Gespräch', p. 187.

[43] Sutcliffe, p. 150

[44] Ibid., p. 152.

[45] Berghaus in interview with Georg–Friedrich Kühn, *Die Zeit*, 37, 4 September 1987 at: http://www.zeit.de/1987/37/Kuehne (accessed 18 June 2010).

'was enthroned on a kitchen chair on top of what looked like a cone.'[46] Another recurring theme was that of Wotan's absent eye, which served as a spring board for a study of the limited perspective of humanity. Berghaus had Wotan, the Wälsungen and later the Song Bird all cover one eye with a hand, a gesture that nodded at their relatedness, but also hinted at the tunnel vision of the characters in the opera, of their insistence on seeing the world not as it is but as they want it to be.[47] Only Loge, who Berghaus notably bestowed with spectacles, viewed the world in its dialectical entirety, embodying that 'which could be thought between the characters, but won't be thought.'[48]

Conclusion

Uniting the endeavours of Herz and Berghaus was the emphasis they placed on undoing the seamless structures that dominate traditional stagings; Herz's juxtaposition of historical realism and theatrical artifice and Berghaus's Sontagian 'flight from interpretation' exposed the contradictions in canonical opera,[49] and in doing so shattered the fundamental passivity of the Adornian bourgeois opera experience. Arguably, the GDR's most significant legacy in the field of modern opera practice lies not in the attempts of its directors to expose the socio-political relevance of canonical opera, but in

[46] Sutcliffe, p. 152.

[47] Berghaus, 'Gespräch zur *Ring*–Konzeption', p. 158

[48] Interview with Berghaus on Südwestrundfunk, 21 June 1987; cited in Holtz, p. 250.

[49] See Susan Sontag, 'Against Interpretation', in: *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (London, 2009 [originally published 1961]), p. 10.

the varied methods they employed in order to compel audiences, consciously or otherwise, to engage with this relevance. The Wagner of ‘Art and Revolution’ would have approved.